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ADAPTATION OF THE PENN SCHOOL
METHODS TO EDUCATION IN SOUTH
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NATIVE AFFAIRS COMMISSION
PRETORIA · UNION OF SOUTH AFRICA
TO MY COLLEAGUES IN AFRICAN EDUCATION:
THE SCHOOL AS SOCIAL CENTRE

ABOUT the middle of October, 1926, I had the pleasure of spending a few days at Penn Normal, Industrial and Agricultural School on St. Helena Island, Beaufort County, South Carolina. I had not been there very long before I saw that this was the school which, more than any other I had seen, exemplified my ideal for African education, with the school as the centre and chief factor of village development. I was delighted when I learned that Miss Rossa B. Cooley, the Principal of the School, had written a charming account of the work of Penn School which had been published under the attractive title *The Homes of the Freed*.

Knowing from experience how anxious African educators are to improve their schools and how competent they are to act upon suggestions, I approached those good friends of Africa, the Phelps-Stokes Fund, and asked them to help us again by distributing a number of copies of these books in Africa. Not only did Dr. Phelps Stokes and Dr. Jesse Jones agree at once but they decided to distribute along with this volume certain books on allied subjects, and asked me to write a short account of the possible application of the lines of work in the Penn School to African schools.

I found this a more difficult task than I had anticipated for there is really no Penn "system" of education. There is at St. Helena Island a full appreciation of the social values of education and an atmosphere of sincere but simple Christian coöperation, but there is no technical method which can be easily translated from America to Africa. The book with its wonderful story, delightfully told, will have its influence on all readers. In commenting upon it I feel like one who tries to paint the lily. However, a promise is a promise and must be kept.

SOME COMPARISON OF CONDITIONS

Before attempting to say how far the Penn outlook on education and the Penn methods of approach are applicable to African conditions, it seems necessary to make clear certain similarities and unlikenesses in the conditions which obtain in the two continents.

The first difference is, I think, that the Negroes of America are Christians, inured to regular work, accustomed to daily and even hourly contact with the white man, owners or renters of their own clearly defined portions of land, and individualistic in their social life. Conditions generally in Africa at present are, I suppose, the exact opposite of these. But it is important to remember that there are already in many parts of Africa localities where two or three generations of Christian civilised Africans have produced conditions not unlike those of St. Helena Island. It would be easier and more economical of effort to begin to work on Penn lines in these communities first.

A second difference which may make the Penn system difficult of transplantation to Africa is the tendency on the part of the controllers of education in some parts of the continent, be they Government or Mission Council, to prevent or hamper new and individualistic work by hard and fast restrictions and regulations. It would, for example, be difficult to conduct a "Penn School for all Ages" in a country where pupils over sixteen years of age are not admitted to the primary school. Further, head teachers, where compelled to work to and to be examined on departmental syllabuses and time tables, will not dare to set their pupils to work on the "Home Acre" or take them to a village "Clean-up Week." One remembers in this connection the excuse given by the Native girls who left their dormitory in an untidy condition: They had no time to clean up because they had to go to their hygiene lesson! It will, however, be found that Government Departments and controlling Mission Boards are susceptible to reason (though this is denied by some) and that permission to do the kind of work attempted at Penn School can generally be obtained.

Long experience of the ways of Governments and Mission Boards suggests that permission for the experiment be obtained beforehand and that the proposals submitted be made to look as much like a syllabus as possible!

A third feature which has helped in the success of Penn School is the fact that the principals are women of breeding and culture, trained by the great and good Frissell of Hampton, and loved, befriended, and helped by some of the choicest spirits in the United States. The elements for all this helpful support are with us in Africa also, though not yet to the same degree as at Penn. We can, however, emulate the Penn School midwives and improve ourselves by study, practice and prayer. Luckily for us, the Vacation Course or Summer School is becoming a feature of the work of African Departments of Education. Mission Councils or Boards could help us all by making it possible for their teachers, white as well as black, to attend these schools. It is only the teacher in the outstation who knows fully the downward pull of the African environment and the need for help and inspiration such as the Vocation Course can give.

In attempting to apply the Penn or any other "system" of education to Africa, we need to remember that "the letter killeth but the spirit giveth life." Some, perhaps many, of the conditions so graphically described by Miss Cooley do not apply to Africa as we know it today. But it will be recognized that, *mutatis mutandis*, the work of the Penn School as set out both in Miss Cooley's book and in the school report can afford us many suggestions for our work in Africa. Some of these may be named.

SUGGESTIONS APPLICABLE TO AFRICA

(1) The work of Penn School is in daily and even hourly touch with the life of the island community. That this is the case can be seen at once by reference to page 16 of the report, *A Rural Experiment*, sent with this letter. There will be found an account of twenty-eight committees which bind the school to the life of the

community. It will easily be seen how *real* the school lessons on nature study and elementary agriculture are when part of the teaching of these subjects is done at the homes of the pupils. Domestic science and hygiene lessons take on a new significance when the bigger girls prepare and cook the midday meal for the day pupils and when the teachers and pupils organise and carry out a "Clean-up Week" in the neighbouring village. Home making becomes much more than a text book matter when in these school grounds there is a "Better Home" managed, and at times lived in, by the pupils of the school.

I know of native institutions so fortunately situated that every one of the twenty-eight Penn activities could be carried out. I do not know of a single school where some at least of these community activities cannot be put into practice *if the teachers believe sufficiently in them*.

I suppose it is because of European tradition that so many of our schoolhouses are more or less isolated units, situated far from the centres of village activity and open only for a few hours a day. And some of our teachers are "nine o'clock to three" men and women, who grumble if called upon to do anything more than classroom teaching. "The worst of this place," said the principal of one of the most "successful" (from the examination result standpoint) institutions in Africa, "is that the ignorant villagers so often bother us with requests for help that we cannot get on with our work." "Thank God for the influenza epidemic of 1918," said another with a wider outlook, "for it was in visiting the homes of the stricken people that our pupils first learned the real meaning of community service."

(2) Penn is primarily a day school although boarders are taken. *There is a daily relationship between the school and the homes of the pupils*. In Africa, the tendency is still to make all but the most elementary schools boarding institutions. The reasons are, of course, obvious. The gap between life at the Christian school with all it stands for, and life at the heathen home with all it entails, is too great to be bridged. If the young plant is to develop

it has to be transplanted. It may be, however, that we have regarded the gap as greater than it really is. It may be that there are some things in the heathen home life that we should do well to cherish. In any case, if we are to make the idea of community service a working reality it seems desirable to admit day pupils to our boarding schools and to develop the day school plan as soon as possible.

(3) How can we develop sympathetic relations between the community and our African schools? First, by the location of our schools in the centres of population. Let us so plan that there may be a classroom in every school or a hut which may also be used as a meeting room and a kitchen for sewing and cooking.

In the second place, let us train our teachers to include the life of the community in their ideals, both in our normal schools and in Vacation Courses. If possible, let the teachers be of the same tribe and language as the children they teach. Require them to live in the villages where their schools are located, and teach them to regard themselves as shepherds and not as hirelings. Give them a status and a responsibility in the Mission Councils and let them regard themselves really as co-workers with the missionary.

Thirdly, let the curriculum be set up after a survey of the immediate needs of the people. Let not European tradition dominate too much. Which is really more important in the African villages today—practical hygiene or the ability to read? Elementary agriculture or geography? Wise recreation or arithmetic? No one can dogmatise on these points. Procure a copy of Dr. Jesse Jones' wise little book on *The Four Essentials of Education* and apply those world-wide principles to the school situation in your midst.

Encourage in every way the interest and coöperation of the parents of your children. Tolerate and even encourage the gaping visitor to your school. Create school committees including the missionary, the parents and the teacher. Make use of a generous emulation; give a flag to the school with the cleanest village, another to

the school with the best home gardens, and so on. Do not neglect regular and sympathetic supervision—the very life blood of schools and especially of community schools.

(4) Penn has a host of wise and generous friends. I met Miss Cooley first at a fashionable summer resort—the guest of a man honoured throughout the States. Here she was making friends for her school. Look at page 58 of the report. Take a single item, “Income Contributions for general purposes, \$21,143.32.” Again, on page 60, “Special Donations received towards lifting of debt, \$14,400.00.” Look at the buildings and the equipment.

I doubt if we African educators do all we could to make friends for our work. Perhaps we are more shy than Americans—perhaps we have not such faith in ourselves and our work. I doubt if we do all we could to enlist the help of the native chief, to say nothing of the European trader and settler. Why not let one or two of our trained girls help the settler’s wife in the kitchen or nursery, and encourage our young men to work on the settler’s plantation, provided we are satisfied regarding the moral and material result? Let us not hold ourselves too aloof from the settler and the trader.

Finally, do we present our work to the world at large in the best way? The reports of the Phelps-Stokes Commissions show what splendid work is being done, and yet I doubt if Africa has published anything so attractive as *The Homes of the Freed* or *A Rural School Experiment*. It is not a case of boasting. There is not a trace of that in either of these volumes. If, as I believe, there is a moral obligation to be intelligent I see no reason why we should not try this way among others to win friends for our work in Africa.

C. T. LORAM.